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SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON (OF PEARSON'S WEEKLY)

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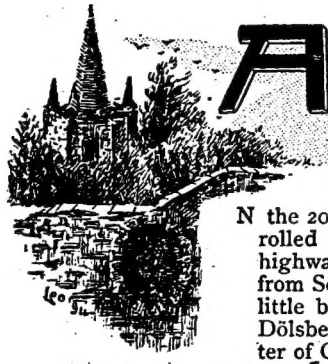
EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON.

No. 319.] *FOR THE WEEK ENDING FEBRUARY 9, 1895.* [PRICE ONE PENNY



A SAINT IN PAWN

ON the 20th of May, 189—, a light carriage rolled rapidly along one of the finest highways in the world—that which leads from Sorrento to Salerno. On the narrow little back seat sat Count Dietrich von Dölsberg and his bride, the lovely daughter of Councillor von Gumpel.

They had spent three weeks on the Riviera, and along the Gulf of Naples, and for the last week had engaged separate apartments at the inns, and had omitted the good-night kiss. Little misunderstandings had arisen between the newly-married pair.

The Countess Lenore was a petted child, exacting, and a little imperious, and, above all, very obstinate. She was as deeply in love with her husband as he with her, but she greatly resented any attempt to exercise authority over her; so now they sat, side by side, cold and silent.

Count Dietrich was keenly appreciative of the beauties of nature, and would gladly have thrown his strong arms about her and whispered in her pretty little ear, "Lenore, only open your eyes and look about you. How can you be so cold among such scenes? How can you give yourself up to such petty whims in the presence of such grandeur and beauty?"

But he said nothing till, at a sudden turn in the road, one of the picturesque old Saracenic towns lay before them. Flat-roofed grey stone houses, with outside staircases, arched bridges over the court yards and narrow alleys. Then he could no longer repress an exclamation of delight and surprise.

"Lenore, look! how wonderfully picturesque! It is the most enchanting little nest in all Italy. We must stop here. Do you hear, coachman? Drive us to the best hotel!"

The coachman smiled pityingly. "The best hotel! There is no choice here. I think we had better drive on. There is nothing here for your Excellencies."

"All the same, here I shall stop, if I have to sleep on straw. I must see the place by daylight."

The coachman protested in vain, and the young Countess made a few sharp observations on her husband's inconsiderate self-will, but Count Dietrich insisted on stopping.

They turned into the principal street of the little town. An excited crowd stood in front of one of the best houses, shouting and screaming. The carriage was obliged to halt, and the coachman called out to ask what was the matter. At least twenty voices hastened to satisfy his curiosity, but the Count and Countess could only make out that Santa Elena had something to do with it.

Now a door opened in the high wall of the house, and out stepped a priest.

The excited crowd rushed up the steps and pushed the old gentleman back against the door, which had been closed behind him. A hundred voices called out a question, then stopped to hear his answer.

The old priest shrugged his shoulders and said, shaking his head, "Nothing can be done. He is as stubborn as a donkey."

Then arose such a howl of rage that even the Neapolitan carriage horses—well used to such demonstrations—shied violently.

Fists were shaken in the air and a few stones thrown at the small windows in front of the house, but at last the old priest managed to make himself heard again, and finally succeeded in dispersing the crowd. The "Golden Eagle" was only a few steps away, and the young couple soon reached it in safety.

Out stepped a priest.

The stout little round-faced host received his distinguished guests with the utmost cordiality, and led them through a little orange garden and up a stairway to a flat roof, then over an arched stone bridge and up another stairway to the lodgings assigned them. It was a lofty, vaulted room, with glass doors at either end. The scanty furniture was old fashioned and rickety, and a slight odour of mould and dust filled the dim, cellar-like apartment.

The Count found this ancient banqueting hall far more attractive than the finest rooms in a modern hotel, but Lenore shrugged her shoulders, and sniffed suspiciously about. "It is more like a potato cellar than a bedroom," said she, "and looks as if it had not been dusted since the last century. Pah! how stifling!"

Half an hour afterwards, the host came and escorted them to supper, which was well cooked and daintily served. The fat, curly-headed host was also cook and waiter. Count Dietrich made up for his wife's silence by a lively conversation with the landlord; and, after praising the excellent supper, asked for an explanation of the popular disturbance which he had witnessed.

"Ah, you mean the scene before Novelli's house," answered Curly-head.

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"May the plague take—beg pardon, Signora. The people have good cause to be angry with this Signor Novelli. The worst of it is that he is, not only the cloth merchant, banker, usurer, and cut-throat Novelli, but he is also our Podesta (Mayor). If it were not for that, you would probably have seen him hanged over his own doorstep."

"Ah, per Bacco! this begins to be interesting," said the Count.

"Well, your Excellency must know that the day after to-morrow, the 22nd of May, is the feast of St. Elena, our patron saint, and there are not many little towns in Italy which can boast such a celebration as ours on her fête-day. People flock here from all the country round. It costs us hard work and a great deal of money to do honour to our most holy patroness, but we have good reason to make a special effort, for our church is lucky enough to possess an ancient treasure which is the envy of all Christendom. It is a solid silver bust of the saint, set with precious stones, and with a golden crown upon her head. Our Bishop has an old document which he will show you if your Excellency cares——"

"Not particularly," said the Count, smiling. "I would rather hear what Signor Novelli has to do with your St. Elena."

"Ah," said the little man, "that is a story! I am ashamed to be fellow-citizen to such a villain. Our cathedral dates back to Saracenic times, and is naturally rather out of repair, and experts have pronounced it unsafe. But, as we are very poor, we trusted to the dear Lord's protection and St. Elena's intercession, till a large stone fell from the wall and killed an old woman. Then, of course, we took up the matter in earnest.

"The people gave all they could, and His Holiness the Pope added something; but it fell far short. Then Novelli offered to make up the deficiency if we would make him Podesta and give him the Saint's bust as security. Of course, we had to accept his terms. Money is power all the world over, and the devil is in every gold piece. So, Heaven forgive us, Signor Novelli has the key of the Saint's shrine, and will only give it up when his interest is paid. We have managed to pay it for five years, but these are hard times.

She danced about with him until he quieted down.

"The women and the priests have tried to influence him through his young wife, the most beautiful little woman in all the country round, and a perfect angel—of course, a man can buy anything with money. The old ruffian is desperately fond of her, but even Signora Elena can do nothing with him when there is money in the question."

Early the next morning, the Count opened the door and stepped out on the balcony which looked out toward the sea. His wife was still asleep, and the young husband, as he bent over her, could hardly refrain from waking her with a kiss. But he must not be weak, and so lose the upper hand for life.

Count Dietrich gazed gloomily out upon the smiling heavens and the pretty old town bathed in sunshine; bit his lip and tugged nervously at his moustache. How happy they might be if only this self-willed young creature—— How would it all end? And yet every day he was more and more in love with her.

He paced slowly up and down the broad balcony, then went on tip-toe back into the room. Lenore was awake, and her eyes were full of tears. He saw that, though she turned her head away.

"Good morning, Lenore. Will you not at least say good morning to me?"

"Good morning."

That was all. He stamped his foot, got his field-glass and went out again, slamming the door behind him. The distant sounds of the gay Southern street-life filled the fresh morning air. Children's voices came shrill from some quarter near at hand, and when he turned his glass in that direction, he saw, on a flat roof, perhaps fifty feet distant, three lovely children, from three to six years old. The youngest, an exquisitely beautiful child, was kicking and crying furiously in his little sister's arms and she tried in vain to quiet him.

A door opened and out came a young girl in a loose white gown, over which fell her luxurious black hair. She took the crying child in her arms, wiped his eyes, kissed him, and danced about with him until he quieted down. Then she came to the edge of the parapet and pointed out to the little one all sorts of things to divert his mind.

If Count Dietrich had admired the child, he was enraptured with the lovely face which glowed in tender freshness from its frame of coal-black hair. Through his glass he could see even her white teeth and the dimple in her round cheek when she smiled. Now she turned and looked directly at him. What eyes! Alas! she saw him looking at her, and went quickly into the house with the child in her arms.

A hand was laid on his arm, and he started like a sinner caught in the act.

"What interests you so much?" asked Countess Lenore in a cold, indifferent tone.

The Count was annoyed and spoke with exaggerated admiration of his charming neighbours, thinking to arouse her jealousy.

The Countess looked through the glass, then said, turning away:

"Strange taste! Shall we not go down to breakfast?"

He made her a formal little bow and accompanied her to the guest-room below.

"Don Pasquale," said he to the host, "there is a raving beauty in your neighbourhood. Are there many such pretty girls in your town?"

Curly-head bowed and said: "Your Excellency is very kind. We have indeed some pretty girls, but I do not know which of them lives near here."

Count Dietrich described the locality, and had hardly mentioned the three children when Don Pasquale interrupted him.

"Ah, it must be Signora Novelli herself."

"But she looks like a girl of sixteen."

"Quite true; she looks very young, but it must be the Signora, for all the other women in the house are old."

"Corpo-di-Bacco!" cried the Count enthusiastically, "then I solemnly swear that for a kiss from that angel, I will gladly pay the thousand lire out of my own pocket to her skinflint of a husband."

"Your Excellency must be joking," said Don Pasquale incredulously.

"And your joke is in rather bad taste," murmured the Countess in German.

Count Dietrich pretended not to hear her remark, and insisted that his offer was made in all seriousness. The guest who was willing to give one thousand lire for a kiss, went up several degrees in Don Pasquale's estimation, and shortly after the Count found him in close conversation at the door

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with several portly old men. Don Pasquale approached him at once and whispered that these dignitaries had just returned from another interview with the Podesta, but in vain. "Ready-money and nothing but ready-money could get the key out of his pocket." "Are we really to understand," added Don Pasquale, "that your Excellency was in earnest about the kiss?"

"I give you my word of honour."

Don Pasquale's first step was to tell the chief dignitaries of the town of the stranger's munificent offer. They finally decided to commit the intelligence to the highest clerical authority.

The worthy Padre Sebastiano could hardly refrain from a right worldly expression, so great was his surprise. They had to assure him again and again that the distinguished foreigner was not joking.

Finally he leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, took a pinch of snuff, and gave the matter his serious consideration.

"A most absurd story!" cried he, rubbing his hands. "As you know, my friends, the Lord Bishop comes to-morrow. We must try and get this business settled before he comes. I think I will undertake it. The good Bishop will absolve me. Dear me, what does the proverb say: 'A kiss given in honour harms nobody.' And if it should serve to liberate our Holy Patroness, old Novelli will certainly give in when he sees the money."

"Oh, Holy pity!" cried one of the men, aghast. "Reverend sir, you are not thinking of making the proposition to the Podesta himself?"

"Yes, why not?" answered the priest. "He is the lord and master of Signora Elena's lips."

"Then all is lost," said Don Pasquale, in distress. "His avarice is great, but his jealousy is greater. I know what I am talking about, Reverend Father!" and the five old men nodded assent. Then Padre Sebastiano became very serious.

"So you want me to treat with the fair lady herself; ah-ah!" he took another pinch of snuff, reflected a little, then started to his feet with a comical sigh, and said:

"So I am going to make a go-between of myself in my old days! But what will not a man do for his patron saint. I may as well start at once."

Padre Sebastiano put on his newest Sunday cassock, brushed his hat with special care and started off. He chose the least frequented streets so that no one might detain him on the way, and also that he might reach the Podesta's house unobserved.

His plan of operation was, however, not very clear to him. More than once he stood still to think it over. His mind was so occupied that before he knew it he found himself on a terrace overlooking the Novelli's back building. He could see Signora Elena at her needlework and her little ones playing about.

By a round-about way Padre Sebastiano reached the wall of the same fruit garden where Don Pasquale had lain in ambush. The whole neighbourhood seemed deserted, so he might venture to try and attract Signora Novelli's attention. But he was a little man and would be obliged to climb a tree as Don Pasquale had done before him. To be sure, he was rather afraid of spoiling his new cassock, and besides—what if anyone should see him! He laughed softly to himself. "Ah, saints in Heaven, I certainly never dreamed of playing such boyish pranks in the service of my blessed patroness!"

Presently the Signora caught sight of the good padre, her reverend confessor, a comical-looking object, perched in the green tree-top, smiling up at her rather sheepishly, and gesticulating eagerly with his walking-stick.

"Good day, my daughter!" said he in a loud whisper. "I must positively speak to you without your husband's knowledge. Are you sure that nobody is listening?"

"No, no, indeed, Father!" answered her sweet voice plaintively. "I am never safe from him anywhere and especially to-day. He thinks that there was somebody in that tree before, trying to attract my attention. What can you want of me?"

"A kiss, my little pigeon; only a kiss," whispered Padre Sebastiano with a roguish smile. Her childish terror made her look so charming, that he could not resist the temptation to add to the little woman's bewilderment. Then she stood with wide eyes and open mouth; the crimson blood rushed to her face; then she uttered a low cry and vanished.

After a while she came back and peeped shyly over the parapet. "Reverend Father, are you still there?" whispered she, behind her hand. The Reverend Father had been sucking an orange to while away the time, and had not seen her return. When he heard her voice he started and answered with his mouth full of orange juice, "Yes, indeed, my daughter. I am still here. Why did you run away in such a hurry?"

"Oh, I am so terribly frightened. Suppose somebody should hear us. He follows me about everywhere, and the servants are not to be trusted. But it is not right for you to make fun of a poor woman like me!"

Padre Sebastiano answered eagerly: "But I am not in

The Countess came in from the balcony.

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fun. What I said is sober earnest. Can you not come down into the garden, child, so that I can tell you about it?"

"No, no, impossible! All the doors are locked. But he has given me permission to go to church in the evening."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. He is not going. He is afraid of the people, proud as he is."

"Very well; I shall rely upon your coming," said Padre Sebastiano gravely, "for, let me tell you, Santa Elena's ransom depends on you, and you alone. God bless you, my child!" and with a kindly smile he climbed down from his perch.

A quarter of an hour later he knocked at the door of the Count's apartment.

The Count had returned from his walk warm and dusty, and stood at the washstand in his shirt-sleeves.

He thought that Don Pasquale was knocking to announce dinner, so called out "Come in!" and in came Padre Sebastiano with a polite bow. "Ah," was the Count's first thought, "that chatterbox of a landlord has brought the clergy about my ears. Now I suppose this Reverend Father will point out to me the exceeding impropriety and sinfulness of my offer, and show me how a miserable heretic like myself can earn the Church's blessing and St. Elena's thanks by spending one thousand lire, leaving the kiss out of the bargain, however."

He was so confused that his knowledge of Italian deserted him, and his apologies for his incomplete toilet, as well as his inquiries as to what procured to him the honour of so unexpected a visit, were a jumble of several different tongues.

The reverend gentleman was also embarrassed, and their mutual apologies would never have come to an end, if the Countess had not come in from the balcony and invited Padre Sebastiano to take a seat.

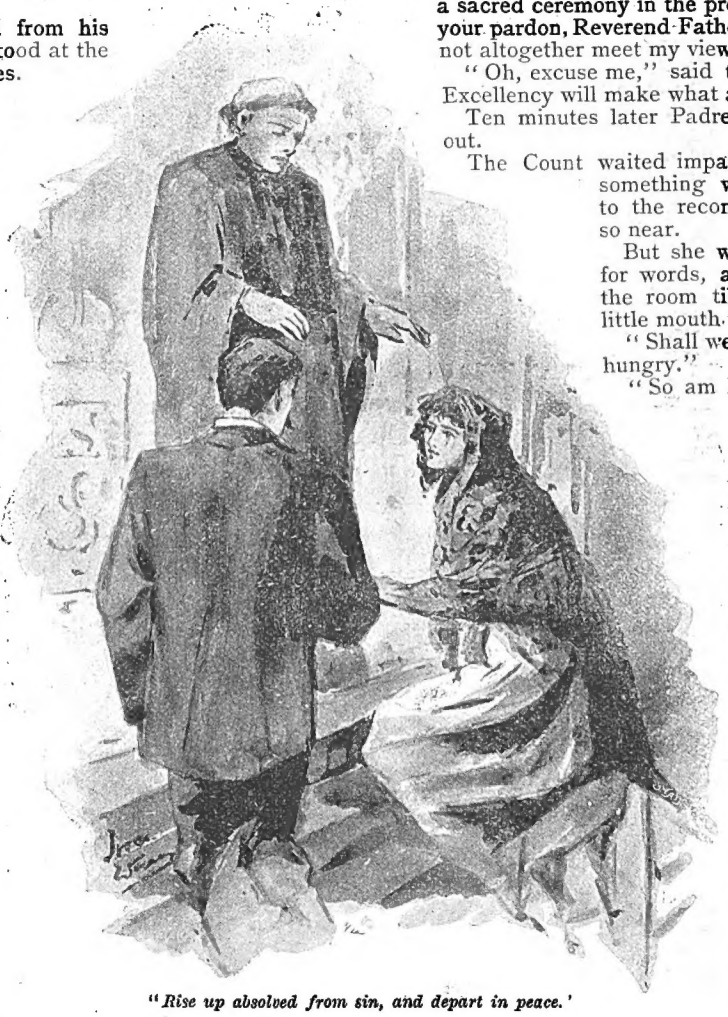
She sat down opposite him smiling, and opened the conversation in the most matter-of-course tone of voice, by the question, "I suppose you have come about the kiss, Reverend Father?"

Padre Sebastiano looked in amazement from the Count to his beautiful young wife, and at last managed to say: "Yes, of course—I mean—Signor Pasquale told me that your Excellency—Does the Signora know about it?"

"Yes, certainly," said the Countess, smiling. "My husband has no secrets from me. I think it is a charming idea."

The Count, with his red face buried in a towel, could not help muttering, "Well, upon my word!"

The Countess pretended not to hear him, and went on quite composedly, "I have been looking at the little woman all the morning. She is really lovely. I must confess that if I were a man I would give two thousand lire for a kiss from her. Indeed, I am afraid I should go so far as to carry her off from her old scarecrow of a husband."



"Rise up absolved from sin, and depart in peace."

The Countess went on cheerfully: "And you think that the young woman will consent to the kiss?"

The Reverend Father blushed like a bashful boy, and answered shyly: "Yes; I do not see why she should refuse. Your husband, Comtesse, is by no means repulsive. I—I mean—she has promised to come to church this evening. The Lord Bishop will be there you know. The church is beautifully dressed. The clergy and the choir boys will wear their finest vestments. Oh, your Excellency must see it! It will be fine. And after the service, when the people are gone and the church is dark, I think—I think she will not refuse. And if she should be so foolish, the Lord Bishop will have a serious word to say about it."

"So it seems that this unfortunate kiss is to be solemnised at a sacred ceremony in the presence of the clergy. I beg your pardon, Reverend Father, but this arrangement does not altogether meet my views," said the Count.

"Oh, excuse me," said the Padre politely. "Your Excellency will make what arrangements you please."

Ten minutes later Padre Sebastiano bowed himself out.

The Count waited impatiently for his wife to say something which should open the way to the reconciliation which now seemed so near.

But she would not speak. She hoped for words, and he paced up and down the room till she opened her charming little mouth to say:

"Shall we go down? I am dreadfully hungry."

"So am I," said he, hastily opening the door for her to pass.

* * * * *

The bells announced with joyful clamour the approach of St. Elena's festa. The day's heat had been succeeded by a cool, refreshing sea-breeze, and the Count, weary with climbing about the rocky streets, sat smoking in the balcony.

The Countess came out and said, still with the same ironical smile:

"Well, don't you hear the bells calling you? St. Elena is waiting for her deliverer."

Count Dietrich tossed his head angrily and tugged at his moustache. But, after a moment's reflection, he answered quite meekly, "Yes, I am ready. Are you going with me?"

"No indeed! I would not be so indiscreet as to interfere with your amusements."

The Count sprang to his feet and his eyes flashed. He took two steps towards his wife.

"Do you know, Lenore, I——" He had almost humbled himself to make the suicidal confession: "Do you know, Lenore, I have made an awful ass of myself!" But just in time he noticed her calm, superior smile, and his words remained unspoken. He seized his hat, and, with a stiff little military bow, he left the fast darkening room.

With a grim determination in his look, like a noble criminal determined to carry out his own sentence, he walked down the street to the church.

At the close of the ceremonies the clergy formed a procession and made a short visit to each of the saints in the little side chapels. The Count stood leaning against one of the slender Moorish pillars which supported the low gallery which ran round the rotunda.

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The procession passed; everybody bowed deeply, some women fell on their knees and tried to kiss the Bishop's hand outstretched in blessing. Just behind the Bishop walked Padre Sebastiano, his kindly old face full of anxious care. His eyes were searching here and there over the heads of the crowd. Ah, now he catches sight of the eccentric German gentleman. He touches his arm in passing and whispers: "I am in despair, my dear sir; she will not do it. She is in such fear of her tyrant's anger, that even the promise of all manner of heavenly blessings cannot move her."

He kept hold of the Count's sleeve and drew him gently along. Suddenly he grasped him tightly by the arm, so that the Count could hardly suppress an exclamation of pain.

"Eccola!" ("There she is") whispered the Padre hastily, and nodded towards a little woman kneeling near by. She had just caught the Bishop's hand, and was looking up beseechingly into the benignant prelate's face.

The Count broke from the Padre's grasp, and stood as if rooted to the spot. Yes, it was she! And she was so far, far prettier close at hand than at a distance. He had never seen such fabulously innocent, childish eyes in a woman's face, and it seemed far less idiotic and reprehensible to have offered one thousand lire for a kiss from those lips than it had done half-an-hour ago.

After the procession had passed he stepped forward, intending to speak to the devout little beauty; but she seemed to recognise him, and a burning flush suffused her pale cheeks.

She rose hastily, drew her black lace veil over her face and slipped away in the crowd. After a moment's hesitation, the Count followed her. But he had hesitated too long; she had already disappeared in the crowd. The Count elbowed his way recklessly out, but she was nowhere to be seen, neither on the steps nor in the Piazza. Could she have slipped out by another door? He ran round the church. No, there was no other entrance. Perhaps, she was still inside. He entered the cathedral again. Choir-boys and acolytes were extinguishing the lights. She was not there.

But wait, what was that? A slender female form, with a black lace mantle over the head. Ah, there she was at last! She stood below the pulpit in earnest conversation with a black cassock which could hardly belong to anybody but Padre Sebastiano. Now the old gentleman turned round. It was indeed he. The sound of footsteps had attracted his attention and when he recognised the Count, he opened the little bronze door under the pulpit steps and pushed the lady through.

The Count rushed up, seized the good priest by the arm and in his excitement said to him in German: "What have you done with her? Why do you hide her from me? Am I to have my kiss or not?"

Padre Sebastiano placed his broad back against the door and waved the excited man gently away. A broad smile lighted up his kindly face, and he cooed softly to him: "Gently, gently; be quiet, be quiet, my son! She has changed her mind, the little pigeon. You shall have your kiss, Excellenza, but not here in the lighted church. The poor little thing is too timid."

"Of course, of course; in outer darkness, if she likes it better," cried the Count impatiently. Then he tried to get hold of the door handle.

"Excuse me a moment. Do you happen to have the one thousand lire by you? If so, I must beg you to——" and with an insinuating smile he held out his open hand.

The Count felt in his breast-pocket, and said with an angry shrug: "How suspicious you Italians are. Well, I'll pay in advance," and hastily took a red bank-note from his pocket-book and pressed it into the hand of the priest, who now drew aside with a polite bow.

Now at last the road was clear. Padre Sebastiano himself threw open the little bronze door for him. His heart beat faster than on the day when, as an ensign, he had fought his first duel. The door closed behind him. It was very dark, but by the faint gleam of light from the little shuttered window, he could see a shadowy form. He whispered softly, "Signora Elena!" a garment rustled, the shadowy figure glided towards him, and the next moment he felt a pair of soft warm lips against his own, two arms were thrown about his neck, and the delicate little hands clasped behind his head.

His expectations were more than realised. Never in her most loving moments had his Lenore kissed him so tenderly, so fervently. Ah, these hot-blooded Southern women knew how to love! It would be a pious mission, a work of humanity to rescue this lovely creature from that horrible, ogreish miser. He clasped her closer, and warmly returned her caresses.

But now sighed Lenore: "Stop, stop, enough! You will smother me! Forgive me, Dietrich, forgive me! I have been very silly! Forgive me the deceit. I love you so dearly. I cannot live when you are angry with me."

The Count's arms sank helplessly down. "You, Lenore!" cried he, quite overcome with astonishment.

"Yes, you dear, faithless man. It is I, your wedded wife! To be sure I cannot give you kisses worth one thousand lire apiece, but——"

He silenced her with kisses, and murmured, "You dear, sweet, lovely creature; can you, indeed, forgive me?"

He felt her tears upon his cheeks, though she did not answer, and then they went out of the dark, close little room.

Padre Sebastiano stood outside the door and shook his finger playfully at them.

"Aha!" said he. "You have kept me waiting a long time!"

With one accord they each seized one of his hands and stooped to kiss it. He drew back and said modestly, shaking his grey head: "No, no; not that, my dear children. I do not deserve that. I am only a poor, sinful man, and have been cherishing sinful thoughts. May St. Elena intercede for me when I come to make my atonement. But I am a priest, and have power to absolve from sin when I see true repentance. You are, I know, arch-heretics and Lutherans, but if you do not despise God's mercy——"

Count Dietrich seized his wife's hand and drew her to her knees beside him, and the old priest laid his hands on them in blessing, and said, in rather a trembling voice: "Rise up absolved from sin, and depart in peace!"

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OUR Count, as we called him, had lived here so long that we forgot that he was not an Englishman born and bred. It was chiefly when he chose to relate some strange tale of his native Poland that we remembered that he had been obliged to seek refuge in this country owing to the part he took in the unsuccessful uprising of 1831. One winter evening a conversation about hunting led him to relate, in perfect seriousness, the following wild and legend-like story of his early life in Poland:—

The year before the rising I went from my native place to spend Christmas at the house of my uncle in the wooded country of Upper Lithuania. He was a nobleman who boasted his descent from one of the oldest houses in Poland, and still held the estate which his ancestors had defended through many a Tartar invasion. My uncle had three sons—Armand, Henri, and Constantine—brave, handsome young men. His nearest neighbours were a family named Lorenski whose property bordered on my uncle's land. There was not a family of their station within leagues; but, independently of that circumstance, the household had attractions for my cousins, as it consisted of the young Count Emerich, his sister Constanza, and two orphan cousins, Marcella and Eustachia, who had been brought up with them from childhood.

My stay at my uncle's house had not been long when I discovered that Armand was as good as engaged to Marcella, and Henri to Eustachia, while Constantine, the youngest and handsomest of the three brothers, paid vain though deferential court to Constanza. The rising was not then publicly talked of, though known throughout the country to be in full preparation. All the young and brave hearts among us were pledged to it, and my cousins did not hesitate to tell me in confidence that Cousin Emerich and his sister were its chief promoters in that district. They had a devoted assistant in Father Cassimir.

I had scarcely got well acquainted with him and the Lorenskis when two more Christmas visitors arrived at the house. They were a brother and sister, Russian nobles, known as Count Theodore and Countess Juana. Their native place was St. Petersburg. They had spent years in travelling over Europe, and, though nobody knew the extent of their estates, it was supposed to be great, for they spared no expense, and always kept the best society.

Latterly they had been somewhat attracted to Poland, and became so popular among our country nobles that they were invited from house to house, making new friends wherever they went. Count Theodore was a splendid shot, his sister was matchless in singing, and neither ever tired of fun or frolic.

The Lorenskis and the travellers had become fast friends almost on their first acquaintance, which had taken place the previous winter; and Count Theodore and his sister had performed a long winter journey from St. Petersburg to celebrate Christmas time with them.

The peasants said it was never lucky when Christmas came without a wolf-hunt; but that year it was likely to do so. The snow kept falling at intervals, with days of fog and thaw between, till the night before the vigil. In my youth the Lithuanians kept Christmas after the fashion of the old northern times. The celebration began with great devotion, and ended with great feasting.

Christmas Eve was considered particularly sacred; many traditional ceremonies and strange beliefs hung about it, and the more pious held that no one should engage in any profane occupation, or think of going to sleep after sunset. When the day before Christmas came, our disappointment concerning the wolf-hunt lay still heavy on many a mind; but when we rose, we were delighted to see that a strong frost had set in during the night, and by the afternoon no finer prospect of sleighing could be desired.

My cousins and I stood at my uncle's door. Suddenly our ears caught the sound of bells and laughing voices, and in a few minutes up drove the Lorenski sledge in its gayest trappings, with Constanza, the Russian countess, and the young cousins, all looking blithe and rosy in the frosty air, while Emerich and Theodore sat in front, in true hunter's trim, with Father Cassimir himself in charge of the reins.

They had two noble horses of the best Tartar blood, unequalled in the province, as we knew, for speed and strength; and Emerich's cheerful voice first saluted us with: "Ho! friends, it is seven hours yet till midnight, won't you come with us? It is a shame to let Christmas in without a wolf-skin!"

Our hunting gear was donned in a trice; and with my uncle's most trusty man, Metski, to assist in driving, away we went at full speed to the forest. Father Cassimir was an experienced general in expeditions of that kind. He knew the turns in the woods where the wolves scented best; and when we had got fairly among the oaks, down went the pork. For some time it dragged on without a single wolf appearing, though the odour came strong and savoury through cords and straw. "If I were a wolf myself, I would come for that," said old Metski.

The priest quickened his speed, vowing he would not say mass without a skin that night; and we got deeper into the wilderness of oak and pine. Like most of our Lithuanian forests, it had no underwood. We could see the long icicles gleaming like pendants of diamonds for miles through the wild woods, but never a wolf.

The priest began to look disappointed. I have said they were in great spirits, particularly Count Theodore; indeed, he was generally the gayer of the pair; his sister being evidently more prudent—and in this respect they resembled the Lorenskis. Many a jest, however, on the non-appearance of the wolves went round our sledge, of which I remember nothing now except that we all laughed till the old woods rang.

"Be quiet, good children," said the priest, turning in his seat of command; "you make noise enough to frighten all the wolves in creation."

"They won't come to-night, father; they are preparing for mass," cried Count Theodore. "Juana, if the old Finn were here now, wouldn't he be useful?"

"Perhaps he might," said the Countess hesitatingly, with a forced laugh; and she cast a look of strange warning and reproof on her brother.

"What Finn?" asked the priest, catching the Count's words.

"Oh, he is talking of an old nursery-tale we had in St. Petersburg," hastily interposed the lady, though I thought her face had no suggestion of a nursery-tale in it at that moment.

"About the Finns, I'll warrant," said Father Cassimir; "they are a strange people. My brother, the merchant, told me that he knew one of them at Abo who said he had a charm for the wolves; but somebody informed against him for smuggling, and the Russian Government sent him to the lead mines of Siberia. By St. Sigismund, there's the first of them!"

As the priest spoke a large wolf appeared, and half the guns in the sledge were raised.

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"Not yet, not yet," said our experienced commander, artfully turning away as another and another came in sight; "there are more coming," and he gradually slackened the speed of our horses. Far off through the moonlit woods and the frozen night we could hear a strange murmur, which grew and swelled on all sides to a chorus of mingled howlings as the wolves came on by troops.

"Fire now, friends," cried Father Cassimir. "We are likely to have skins enough for Christmas." And, bang! went all our barrels. I saw five fall; but, contrary to expectations, the wolves did not retire—they stood for an instant snarling at us. The distant howling continued and grew nearer; and then, from every glade and alley, down the frozen forest, came by scores and hundreds such a multitude of wolves as we could not have believed to exist in all Lithuania.

"Hand me my gun and take the reins, Metski," cried Father Cassimir. "Drive for your life!" he added, in an undertone; but everyone in the sledge heard him.

Heaven knows how many we killed, but it seemed of no use. Our pork was swallowed—straw and all. The creatures were pressing upon us on every side, as if trying to surround the sledge; and it was fearful to see the leaps that some grey old fellows would take at Metski and the horses.

Our driver did his part like a man, making a thousand winds and turns through the wood; but still the wolves pursued us. Fortunately the firing kept them off, and, thanks to our noble horses, they were never able to get ahead of us; but as far as we could see in the moonlight came the howling packs, as if rising from the earth.

We had seen nothing like it, and all of us did our best in firing, especially Count Theodore, but his shots had little effect, for his hand shook, and I know not if any but myself saw the looks of terrified intelligence which he exchanged with his sister. Still, she and the Lady Constanza kept up their courage, though the young cousins were white as snow, and our ammunition was fast decreasing.

"Yonder is a light," said Constanza at last, as the poor horses became unmanageable from fright and weariness. "It is from the cottage of old Wenzel, the woodman."

"If we could reach that," said Father Cassimir, "and leave the horses to their fate. It is our only chance."

No one contradicted the priest's arrangement, for his last words were felt to be true—though a pang passed over Constanza's face at the thought of leaving our brave and faithful horses to the wolves. Louder rose the howls behind us as Metski urged on with all his might, and far above all went the shout of Father Cassimir—he had the best lungs in the province: "Ho, Wenzel! Open the door, for pity's sake!"

We heard the old man reply, sent one well-aimed volley in among the wolves, and as they recoiled man and woman leaped from the sledge—for our Polish girls are active—and rushed into the cottage, when old Wenzel instantly double-barred the door.

It was woeful to hear the cries of pain and terror from the poor horses as we deserted them; the next instant the wolves were upon them. We saw them from the window, as thick as flies stuck on sugar. How we fired upon them, and with what goodwill old Wenzel helped us, praying all the time to every saint in the calendar, you may imagine.

Ammunition was by this time getting scarce among us There was not a man with a charge left but old Wenzel, who supplied us as long as he could. At length, loading his gun with his last charge, he laid it quietly in the corner, saying one did not know what use might be for it, and he never liked an empty gun.

The wolves had now left nothing but the bones of our horses, which they had dragged round and round the cottage, with a din of howling that almost drowned our voices within. Then they seized on the bodies of their own slain companions, which were devoured to the very skins; and still the gathering was going on. We could see them coming in troops through the open glades of the forest, as if aware that some human prey was in reserve. The hut was strongly built of great pine logs, but it was fearful to hear them tearing at the door, and scratching at the foundations.

The bravest among us was terrified by these sounds. Metski loudly avowed his belief that the wolves were sent upon us as a punishment for hunting on Christmas Eve, and fell instantly to his prayers. Wenzel flung a blazing brand among them from the window, but they did not seem to care for fire; and three of them were so near leaping in that he drove to the log shutter and gave up that method of defence.

None of the party seemed so far overcome with terror as Count Theodore; his spirit and prudence both seemed to forsake him. When the wolves began to scratch he threw himself on his face in a corner, and kept moaning and praying in Russian, of which none of us understood a syllable but old Wenzel.

Emerich and I would have spoken to him, but the woodman stopped us with a strange sign. Count Theodore had taken the relic of some saint from a pocket-book which he carried in his breast, and was, in Russian fashion, confessing his sins over it; while his sister sat silent and motionless by the fire, with livid face and clasped hands. The fire was burning low, but I saw the woodman's face darken. He stepped to the corner and took down his gun, as I believed, to take a last shot at the wolves. Count Theodore was in his way. Wenzel levelled the weapon for an instant at the prostrate man, and before I could speak or interpose a report, followed by a faint, shrill shriek from the Russian, rang through the hut. We rushed to him, but the count was dead. A bullet had gone right through his heart.

"My gun has shot the count, and the wolves will leave us now," said Wenzel coolly. "I heard him say in his prayers that a Finn, now in the Siberian mines, had vowed to send them on him and his company wherever he went."

As the woodman spoke, he handed to Count Emerich, with a hoarse whisper, a bloody pocket-book, taken from the body, and, turning to Juana, said something loud and threatening to her in the Russian tongue. The lady only bowed her head, seeming of all in the hut to be the least surprised or concerned at the death of her brother.

As for us, the complicated horrors of the night had left us stunned and stupefied, till the rapid diminution of the wolfish din, the sounds of shouts and voices, and the glare of torches lighting up the forest, brought us to the window. The wolves were scouring away in all directions; there was a greyness in the eastern sky, for Christmas day was breaking; and from all sides the tenantry of the count, and my uncle, with skates and sledges, guns and torches, were pouring to the rescue.

They had searched for us almost since midnight, fearing that something fearful had detained Father Cassimir and his company from mass. There were wonderfully few wolves shot in the retreat, and we all went home to Count Emerich's house, but not in triumph, for with us went the body of the Russian, of which old Wenzel was one of the bearers. The unanimous determination we expressed—to bring him to justice as a murderer—was silenced when Emerich showed us in confidence a letter from the Russian Minister, and a paper with all our names in a list of the disaffected Upper Lithuania, which he had found in Theodore's pocket-book.

After that we all affirmed that Wenzel's gun had gone off by accident; and on the same good Christmas Day Count Emerich, with a body of his retainers, escorted the Lady Juana to a convent at the other end of the province, the superior of which was his aunt. There is a wooden cross with his name and a Latin inscription on it marking Count Theodore's grave, by our old church on the edge of the forest. No one ever inquired after him, and the company of that terrible night are far scattered.

To prevent unnecessary labour, and consequent disappointment, to any readers of this paper, who in the past have forwarded original stories for insertion, we would take this opportunity of saying that our arrangements for the provision of matter for "Short Stories" are complete for some time to come.

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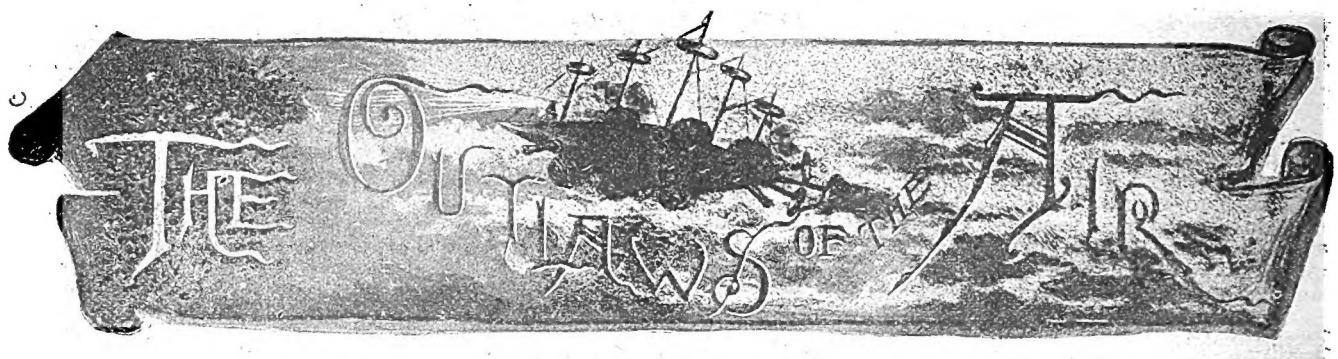


By George Griffith,

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "The Syren of the Skies," &c.

CHAPTER XLIII.

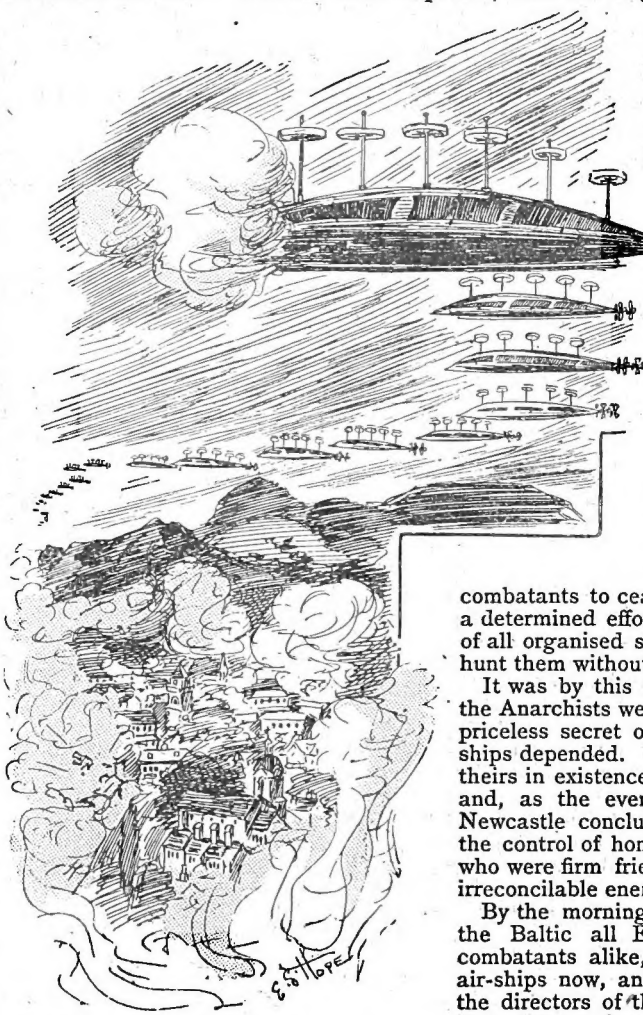
The Outlaws' Eerie.

Immediately the signal to cease firing had been obeyed the air-ships formed in line, and then the *Revanche* flew the signal, "Mount Prieta at a hundred miles an hour. Follow me. Do as I do."

The fleet was now floating over the Bay of Kiel. An almost straight line of over a thousand miles in length drawn south-west from Kiel, marked the course that the *Revanche* began to steer towards the stronghold, which the organised forces of Anarchy, now ranged under the leadership of Renault, had established, in a little rock-walled valley, or rather a deep gorge fenced in with precipices impassable to man or beast, which lay on the northern verge of Mount Prieta.

This is the highest peak of the Cantabrian mountains, the chain, which a glance at the map of Europe will show, running in continuation of the Pyrenean chain from the Bidassoa to Cape Finisterre. Another look at the map will show that the line of flight would pass over Hamburg, Bremen, Antwerp, Paris, and Bordeaux.

Max kept the fleet at an elevation of two thousand feet, and as each of the cities was reached he halted his fleet, sent a couple of shells from the bow gun of each vessel into the midst of it, and then, passing over it at ten miles an hour, dropped half-a-dozen fire-bombs from each of the ships which were flying extended in a long line abreast. This was, of course, merely done for the sake of further intensifying by purely wanton destruction the terrorism which the news of the frightful termination of the Battle of the Baltic had by this time carried like wildfire over the telegraphs of the Continent.



Dropped half-a-dozen fire-bombs from each of the ships.

That night Europe went almost mad with fear. The impartial destruction of the remains of the contending fleets in the Baltic proved, not only that the Anarchists saw in the warfare that was being waged on land and sea an opportunity ready made to their hand for intensifying their terrorism of Society ten-fold, but also that against a fleet of air-ships so powerful as the one under Renault's command, both the Russian aerostats, from which such tremendous results had been expected, and the mightiest naval armaments afloat were absolutely defenceless.

This of itself was enough to send a thrill of terror through the Continent, but when, within the space of twelve hours from mid-day to midnight, five of the chief cities in Germany, Belgium and France had been set on fire in a hundred places at once, it did not take long before terror was aggravated into something like delirium. The war, in which Germany and Denmark had now definitely joined, and upon which, under ordinary circumstances, the eyes of the world would have been fixed with all-absorbing interest, already occupied quite a secondary place in the imagination and the fears of the peoples of Europe.

Indeed, voices were already being raised in appeal to the combatants to cease their own strife and unite in a determined effort to meet the common enemies of all organised society in their own element and hunt them without mercy out of the world.

It was by this time perfectly well known that the Anarchists were not in sole possession of the priceless secret on which the power of the air-ships depended. There were other air-ships than theirs in existence, if anything superior to theirs, and, as the events that had taken place at Newcastle conclusively proved, they were under the control of honourable and distinguished men, who were firm friends of order, and therefore the irreconcilable enemies of Anarchy.

By the morning of the day after the Battle of the Baltic all Europe, combatants and non-combatants alike, was asking where were these air-ships now, and what possible reasons could the directors of the Aerial Navigation Syndicate have for keeping their ships out of the way and allowing the Anarchists to pursue their unheard-of depredations unmolested?

The next morning the *Times* published the following letter from the Chairman of the Syndicate:—

"Sir,—Will you allow me to remind those who are apparently under

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the impression that the Aerial Navigation Syndicate has a special mission and obligation to protect Society at large from the onslaughts of the Anarchists, that this Syndicate is a private Corporation founded primarily upon a commercial basis for the furtherance of the purposes of those who have put their work and their money into it. What those purposes are, or in what manner they will be carried out, is our business and no one else's.

"We recognise no obligations to employ the force at our disposal according to the direction of any Government or Governments. We have broken no laws and attacked no one save the enemies of Society, and therefore our right to complete freedom of action cannot be impugned. We shall act when and how we think fit, and that is all that I either can or will say on the subject.

"I may add that, so far, the publicity given by the newspapers with regard to events still fresh in the public memory has, in each instance, directly assisted the Anarchists in their designs. Through the newspapers Renault's accomplices received the disguised message which he gave them from the dock at Bow Street; through the same medium they were informed of the precise hour at which his execution was to take place, and so were able to rescue him in the nick of time; and thus, too, the rescue of the crew of the *Vengeur* and the terrible tragedy at Newcastle were directly due to information derived from the minute details published in the newspapers.

"I feel sure that all sensible people will agree with me that it would be something worse than madness for us to follow the same foolish course.—Yours truly, "HIRAM S. MAXIM."

To this letter there was obviously no other answer than the admission that the position taken up by the Syndicate was unassailable from the points of view both of legality and expediency. Neither the British nor any other Government had any claim to the knowledge of the secret of the motive-power which was practically the sole yet priceless possession of the Syndicate. The Government was free to experiment in the same direction if it chose, but it had no power to compel a disclosure of the secret which had been brought from Utopia.

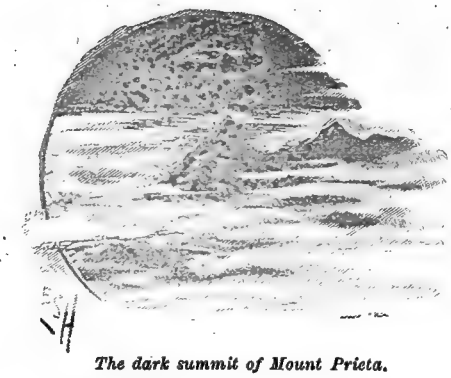
Therefore, there was nothing else for Society to do but to wonder and to wait, while warfare on land and sea and Anarchy militant in the air spread terror and disquiet through the nations, and undermined the very foundations upon which the social fabric rested. But great and all as was the panic which obtained under the new reign of terror, it was by no means lacking in justification. Indeed, if all the facts could have been made public, they would rather have intensified than diminished it.

During the short period that had elapsed since Max had escaped with the *Vengeur* from Utopia he had accomplished wonders both of construction and organisation. He had used the practically unlimited funds which the depredations of the *Destroyer* on the North and South Atlantic had placed at his disposal with an administrative skill well worthy of a far better cause.

By means of the disguised agencies which Hartog had established, and he had perfected, he had been able to obtain the materials for the construction of a fleet of twenty-five air-ships for warlike purposes and one aerial transport, a very large craft capable of lifting great weights and conveying them through the air at a speed which, though only about half that of the cruisers, was still quite enough to put her beyond the risk of capture save by the Syndicate's air-ships, of which only two were known to be in existence.

This transport, which he had named the *Voyageur*, formed the link of communication between the camp of the Anarchists on Mount Prieta and the outside world. She never travelled save by night and under the escort of two of the cruisers, and her duty was to meet the *Pilgrim*, which still passed unsuspected as the private yacht of a wealthy South American gentleman, whose real name was Leo Marcel, at stated rendezvous at sea, out of the regular tracks of shipping, and to relieve her of the stores, guns, ammunition, or treasure which she carried, and bring them back through the air to the camp, which none of the air-ships were permitted even to approach, save under cover of clouds or darkness.

The camp itself, despite the ruggedness and forbidding character of its surroundings, was admirably fitted by nature for the purpose to which Max had devoted it. The gorge was walled in by rocks ranging from a hundred to a hundred and fifty feet in height on all sides save the north, where, through a deep narrow cleft, the stream of water, which came from the



The dark summit of Mount Prieta.

upper part of the mountain and traversed the centre of the little sheltered valley, found its way down the slopes which inclined toward the shore of the Bay of Biscay.

On either side of this stream extended for about three hundred yards to the walls of rock a fairly level sloping plain of light sandy soil, on which between fifty and sixty wooden huts and workshops were now standing. As long as it remained undiscovered by the only enemies that Renault and his followers had to fear, this refuge formed a hidden, entrenched camp from which the Anarchists could safely defy the combined forces of Europe.

From it they could issue forth to slay and plunder and destroy, and to it they could return without the slightest fear of being followed. It was, in fact, a very fortress of Anarchy entrenched in the midst of Civilisation, impregnable and unassailable by all means save one, and only treachery or the most improbable accident could bring that means into operation against it.

A few minutes after midnight on the 17th July, Renault's fleet sighted the dark summit of Mount Prieta rising high above the sea of clouds over which the air-ships had been flying at an ever-increasing altitude after leaving Bordeaux in flames behind them.

Speed was immediately slackened, and the fleet swept slowly forward until a single faint ray of light became visible at the bottom of the dark gulf formed by the gorge in the mountain side. Then the propellers stopped, and one by one the ships sank downwards, until they rested side by side on a little plateau at the upper part of the valley. The *Revanche* landed last, and as they disembarked Max said to Hartog:

"Well, aerial navigation is a very fine thing in its way, but it's a relief to get your feet on *terra firma* again and have a good stretch, after all. Isn't the air of this valley splendid? I wonder what the powers that be down yonder would give for a sniff at it."

"I don't tink myself," said Hartog sententiously, "dat dey vould find it very goot for deir healts unless dey came mit an air-fleet dat vould make it very unhealty for us. But goot air it is, and I can tell you I am as hungry as a volf. Ve had better go and get some supper."

"Yes," replied Max, "that's a very sensible and practical remark. I used to think birds of prey voracious to the extent of greediness——"

"But now dat you are a bird of prey yourself you see dat flying gifs a big appetite. Dat's so, eh?" interrupted Hartog, with a guttural chuckle at his own joke.

"If you like to put it so, yes," laughed Renault. "But you might have put it more politely, perhaps. Still I'll return good for evil for once, and ask you to supper. Lea expects me to-night, and I daresay she'll have enough for two or three."

"Eh? Vat is dat? Is Mam'zelle Lea here? I did not know dat de camp of de outlaws vas putified by such a charming presence as hers."

"Look here, Franz," said Renault, with another laugh, "I shall begin to think that the air of the upper regions has made you drunk if you begin to talk like that. That speech was the nearest approach to poetry that you've made by at least a thousand miles. I must try and remember it for Lea's

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benefit. But, by the way, you mustn't call her 'Mam'zelle Lea' now."

"Ah, I see!" said Hartog, nodding and patting him on the shoulder with his little fat and somewhat flabby hand. "I remember vat you said dat night in de club-room. And so de proud demoiselle has surrendered at discretion, has she? Vell, I congratulate you, friendt Max. I don't tink fery much of vomen myself, for deir mental machinery is altogeder too complicated. I likes my own machinery much better. I feel I can depend more upon it. But still Lea is as putiful as she is goot, and in every way a vorty mate for de chief of de Outlaws of de Air. But you haf not told me yet how she came here."

"Franz," said Max, "if you were not literally rolling in your ill-gotten gains, I should think you wanted to borrow something from me, but as that can't be the case I suppose I must put it down to pure good nature. As for the way Lea got here, that's very simple.

"You see the notoriety that Mrs. Cora Dail got through that unfortunate affair at Bow Street and the Old Bailey got rather oppressive, and then some long-nosed mouchard in the service of the French police managed to smell out a distant connection between her and one of the President's servants, who was suspected of putting that bomb in the carriage, and so Madame Dail decided to return to America while the road was yet open to her.

"She sold off her house before any of our stray shells or bombs smashed it up, and sailed from Marseilles to New York in that Messageries steamer, the *Champagne*, which you remember never was heard of again. She had the misfortune to fall in with three of our air-ships, of which the *Revanche* was one, and they stopped her, kidnapped Madame Dail and two or three other lady friends of hers, some of whom you know. Then they cleared everything that was light and handy and valuable out of the ship, and then sent her to the bottom, as it wasn't thought advisable that she should get to New York and tell any tales."

"Ah!" said Hartog, with a chuckle. "So dat is vat became of her, is it? I tought some accident of dat kind had happened, ven I heard she had not arrifed. Max, I am fery glad to heard dat you haf learnt visdom at last, and seen de folly of being merciful to your enemies. De oder course is just as cheap and piles safer."

"Yes," said Max. "I think you're right. I haven't forgotten what a fool I made of myself when I let those fellows from the *Bremen* go, and I can tell you that the Society that tried to hang me isn't going to get much more mercy at my hands. But here we are at my humble home, for the time being, and there is Lea's own fair self coming to meet us. Now do try and remember that pretty speech for her again."

CHAPTER XLIV.

NEWS AND BAD NEWS.

THE building from which Lea, clothed from head to foot in costly furs, came to meet them was a small wooden house of the bungalow type, which can be purchased in sections and put together with very little trouble. Most of the dwelling houses in the camp were of this kind, and had been taken out to sea in the *Pilgrim*, transferred from her to the *Voyageur*, and then carried through the air to the gorge.

"Welcome, my lord, you come in victory, as usual, I suppose?" said Lea as she came forward to meet Max with her gloved hands outstretched.

"Yes," said Max. "In victory, as usual, if you can call it victory where all the destruction is on one side; but, as far as amusement has gone, we have done very well indeed. We have rescued friend Franz here with his crew from the clutches of British law, set Newcastle on fire, watched the British, Russian, and German fleets do each other mortal damage in the Baltic, and then finished the work for them, and after that, as we came home, we left our cards on the good bourgeois of Hamburg, Bremen, Antwerp, Paris, and Bordeaux, and gave them the wherewithal to illuminate their cities in honour of our visit. Altogether, we have had a fairly busy and most enjoyable four days of it."

"Bravo!" said Lea, slipping her hand through his arm as she turned back towards the house. "What a pleasant state of excitement Europe must be in now. But I suppose you must be as hungry as the usual hunter, so you won't be sorry to hear that supper is ready."

"Not at all," said Max. "Franz here compares his hunger to that of a wolf, and mine would do credit to an Indian after a four days' fast. I suppose you've got enough for both of us?"

"Oh, yes, plenty, and the *Voyageur* has brought back some very nice champagne you will be glad to hear. I believe it originally came from the Duke of Downshire's yacht, which met with an accident the other day on a cruise to the North Cape."

"Oh! so the *Voyageur's* back, is she?" said Max, as they entered the house. "I am glad of that, because it's quite time that we had some definite information as to the movements of the enemy. We had better ask Maurin to supper, and then he can give us the news."

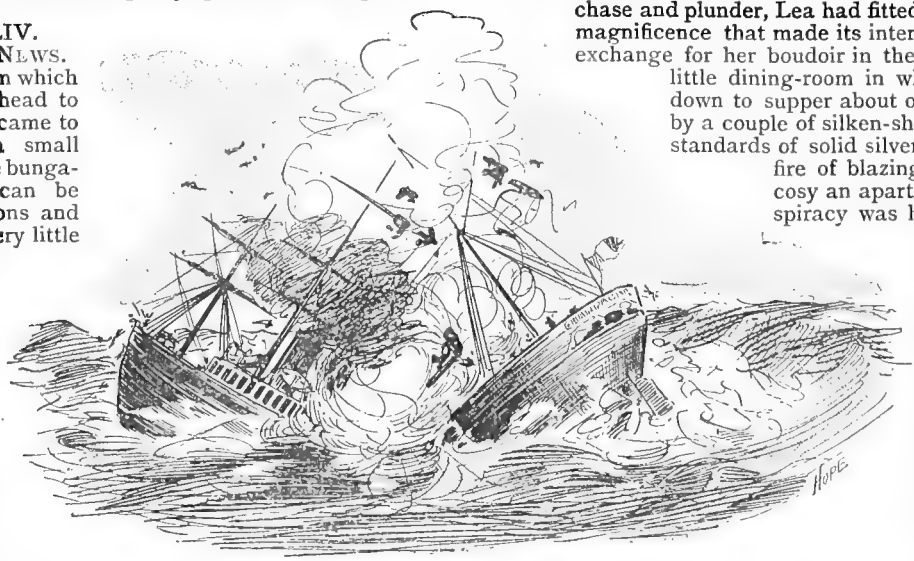
"While we're about it," said Lea, "we may as well have a party, so I'll ask the Rollands and your engineer Raoul to come too, for I know Sophie is dying to see him. Those two will be going into partnership before long, I fancy."

"Dey vouldt make a very goot match if dey did," observed Hartog. "Taxil is a fine young fellow, and a goot Anarchist, and Sophie Vronsky is a goot girl, and fery clever mit her pen, as dose Russian passports she vonce did for me clearly proved. Jah, dey vill do very vell for each oder, I should tink."

"Very well, then," laughed Lea, "we will make a match of it. Now, if you two want a wash, you had better go and get one. I'll have supper ready in half an hour, and then we can make an interesting night of it. Sophie and I had a good nap this afternoon, so we don't care how long we sit up."

Unpretentious as the bungalow looked from outside, its interior was a marvel of warmth and luxury. Between purchase and plunder, Lea had fitted it up with a dainty magnificence that made its interior at least no bad exchange for her boudoir in the Rue Vernet. The little dining-room in which the party sat down to supper about one o'clock, lighted by a couple of silken-shaded lamps on high standards of solid silver, and warmed by a fire of blazing pine logs, was as cosy an apartment as ever a conspiracy was hatched in, and the supper to which these epicurean Anarchists sat down, would not have disgraced the Hotel Bristol or the Café de l'Opera.

Lea and Sophie had cooked it with their own hands, for domestic service was as yet unknown in the Anarchist camp, and the company waited upon them



It wasn't thought advisable that she should get to New York.

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selves and each other with a free-and-easiness which was of the essence of true Bohemianism. In fact, no more well-bred, pleasant-mannered supper party could have been found in Europe than this little company of murderous conspirators, whose names, so far as they were known, were execrated throughout the continent, which was just then shuddering in a frenzy of panic under their last assault.

Until the meal itself was over the conversation was general, but as soon as the two girls had cleared the table of the remains of the eatables, and replaced them with a variety of liquids, cigars and cigarettes were lighted, and Max called upon Maurin, the captain of the *Voyageur*, for such news as he had to tell of the outside world.

"You will be able to get most of it pretty fully from the newspapers I have brought with me," he said in reply. "But I can give you an epitome of it now, and also some particulars which have not found their way into print. In the first place, nothing has been heard of the air-ship *War-Hawk*, commanded by Sir Harry Milton, which captured M. Franz here. After leaving Newcastle, she vanished with the *Vengeur*, and we have not been able to pick up a trace of her since.

"It is rumoured that the Syndicate has another vessel ready to take the air, if not actually afloat, and also that before long a large fleet will be ready for service, but in what part of the world the ships are being built, or when they will actually get afloat, we have not been able to learn."

"That doesn't seem to say much for the intelligence of our agents," said Max with a frown.

Maurin shrugged his shoulders and replied apologetically: "It would seem so, but unhappily the Syndicate appears to have unlimited command of money and so can pay any price for secrecy. Added to that the terrorism which you have inspired both in Europe and America has led to the most extraordinary precautions being taken at all the dockyards and arsenals, ship-building yards, and manufactories, and it is practically impossible to obtain reliable information.

"It is believed that the ships are being built on islands in remote parts of the sea, and that no one is allowed to put foot on these islands who is not personally known to the directors or their friends. We have found that the Syndicate holds no meetings, but Maxim, the chairman, goes to his offices in Victoria Street, Westminster, quite in the ordinary way, and as though nothing had ever happened."

Lea, clothed from head to foot in costly furs, came to meet them.

"Then we must pay him a visit," said Max. "What is the number? Thirty-two, isn't it?"

"Jah, dat's it," chimed in Hartog. "I vent to see him dere vonce about an engine for his aeroplane, and de old fellow insulted me by telling me dat he tought he knew more about engines as I did, so I came avay; but I should like to see him again—at de oder end of von of his own guns."

"All right, we'll go and leave cards on the Maxim-Nordenfelt Company in a day or two, and now, Maurin, can you tell us anything about the *Nautilus*, and that Lieutenant Wyndham, who ought to have been dead long ago?"

"Ah, yes. Lieutenant Wyndham is by this time almost as famous a man as you are yourself, and that *Nautilus* has proved herself to be a really marvellous craft. You know, I suppose, that the French squadron which went to the Baltic to assist the Russians, got through the narrow seas under cover of a general attack on the English Channel Ports and Dover?

"About a week before, the British had been very badly beaten in the Mediterranean. They had neither ships nor men there to give her anything like a chance against the Toulon fleet and the Russian Black Sea fleet, which had forced the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. What force she had in the Mediterranean was caught between the French and Russians and almost annihilated.

"Then the combined Franco-Russian squadron forced the passage of the Straits of Gibraltar, and made a descent on the south coast of England just when the French squadrons from Brest and Cherbourg were ready to make a dash for the north. The dash, as you know, was quite successful, but the other part of the operations ended in complete disaster, thanks chiefly to Lieutenant Wyndham and the *Nautilus*. She had been fitted with two guns of a new type, only lately invented by Maxim——"

"Always that confounded Maxim!" interrupted Renault, between his clenched teeth. "That man's dangerous, and the sooner we go and pay him a visit the better. Well, go on, Maurin; what about the *Nautilus* and her guns?"

"Well," continued Maurin, "according to the descriptions of them published in the papers, they are pneumatic dynamite guns, which will carry cartridges containing five hundred pounds of dynamite to a distance of four miles, and drop these every time within a space of twenty feet square. The guns can be fired four times a minute, so you will see that means that she can throw two thousand pounds of dynamite a minute on a fleet or a fortress. You can easily imagine what that would mean.

"You know also that this *Nautilus* goes into action with nothing but a little oval platform and a conning-tower showing above the water, and therefore invisible at any range over about two miles.

"The French and Russians began with a torpedo attack on Plymouth. This was beaten off with great loss, and just as the French and Russians were drawing off, the *Nautilus* was sighted coming down from Portsmouth. It was about two hours after daybreak then, and the air was clear enough for very good shooting.

"She was made out first by a French torpedo-catcher, which turned and ran for the fleet to report. She was a thirty-knot boat, but she hadn't run half a mile before the *Nautilus* had her ram into her and ripped her up from end to end. Then she got the outside of the fleet, and went to work with her guns. Every shot that struck either disabled a ship or sent her to the bottom. The British warships kept out of the way, and contented themselves with blocking the western end of the channel, until the *Nautilus*, which simply danced round the fastest vessels in the French and Russian fleets, and pounded them to bits with dynamite without their once getting a shot into her.

"When the biggest ships were crippled, the British battleships and cruisers went in and finished them, and then the *Nautilus* turned her attention to the torpedo flotilla. The papers compare it to what a sword fish might do among a lot porpoises. She rushed at them at a speed that made them look as if they were standing still, and smashed them up one

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after another like so many eggs, and by mid-day there wasn't a single battle-ship or cruiser or torpedo-boat left of the division that had attacked Plymouth.

"Then the *Nautilus* and a lot of the British ships came up the Channel, and found two divisions attacking Portsmouth, while a fourth had gone on to Dover. By nightfall a few shattered French and Russian vessels got away to Cherbourg, where they were blockaded by a detachment of the British Channel squadron, and that was the end of the fight.

"Later on that night the *Nautilus* joined them, and by morning her dynamite guns, assisted by the bombardment from the fleet, had laid the fortifications of Cherbourg and half the town in ruins.

"Meanwhile the other French squadron had got away to the north through the Straits of Dover. It was reported that Wyndham wanted very much to pursue it in the *Nautilus*, as he declared he could have destroyed it ship by ship before it reached the Sound, but he was under the orders of the Admiral commanding the Channel squadron, and he sent him to Cherbourg instead."

"Then," said Renault, "between what they've done and we've done, the French and Russian fleets are about destroyed, and the British have lost their Mediterranean Squadron and the one that was blockading the Sound. That, with the two German squadrons that we destroyed, makes a total of, say, six fleets smashed up within as many days. That's pretty good work, even for modern warfare."

"Even mit der valuable assistance of an Anarchist air-fleet," chimed in Hartog, with a chuckle, rubbing his hands with pleasure at the idea of such fearful slaughter and destruction as this meant.

"Yes," said Lea, sending a little cloud of scented smoke from her pretty lips. "I should think a few more experiences like that ought to give even the most civilised nations of Europe enough of fighting for some time to come. What a pity you couldn't get hold of the *Nautilus*, Max. She'd have been very useful as a toll-collector along the steam-ship routes. Wouldn't it be possible to capture her in some way?"

"Max, I've got bad news for you."

"I'm afraid not," said Max, shaking his head. "Of course, I've no doubt we could destroy her, but I don't see much good even in doing that yet, for all the damage she does helps on the cause of Anarchy in general. By the way, Maurin, is there any fresh news about the fighting on land?"

"Not much," replied Maurin. "You remember, of course, that the ten thousand men which the British were able to throw into Antwerp, thanks also to the assistance of the *Nautilus*, frustrated the designs on Belgium, and enabled England to form a junction with Germany in the Low Countries and to make the Quadrilateral practically impregnable.

"That was checkmate to France on the north. The Germans are massing on their eastern frontier, and the Russians on their western frontier, so that there will be some pretty heavy fighting in the next few days; that is, if what has happened at sea, and the general terror that we have spread pretty well all over Europe doesn't put a different aspect on the face of affairs. Now I think that's about all I've got to tell. We've brought a lot of English, French, and German papers with us, and you'll be able to read the accounts in full in the morning."

"All right," said Max, with a half-stifled yawn. "And now I think it's about time to get to bed, for a good many of us haven't slept for two nights. We'll have a council of war in the morning, and decide what is to be done next."

The party broke up very soon after this, and as soon as Max and Lea found themselves alone, all the careless gaiety that she had worn while the others were present suddenly vanished from Lea's manner, and going up to Max, who was standing on the hearthrug by the fire, she put her hands on his shoulders and said very seriously:

"Max, I've got bad news for you, and you ought to hear it at once, so that you can decide what to do before the morning."

"You have bad news, Lea!" he said, in a voice whose gentleness would have astonished anyone who had heard him giving an order on board his ship, or laughing at the slaughter of the helpless crowd in London. "You! Well, if I'm to hear bad news, I would rather hear it from those pretty lips of yours than anyone else's. Now, what is it?"

As he spoke he took her face between his hands, and, holding it there, kissed her two or three times upon the lips before he would let her speak, saying when he at last released her:

"There, that will sweeten the bad news, whatever it is. Now, out with it."

"It's this," she said. "At the council of war you are going to hold to-morrow, the captains of the air-ships are going to make a united demand that you shall appoint a committee of five of them, and tell them the secret of the motor fuel. It has been talked about quite openly while you have been away. They say that it is dangerous for it to remain in the keeping of one man, because if you were to be killed or captured, the fleet would soon be useless."

Max's brows had been gradually coming together while she was speaking, until they formed an almost straight back line across his eyes. He was silent for a moment, and then he said slowly:

"Yes, that's bad news indeed; it means conspiracy, and probably treachery. I wonder who's at the bottom of it? However, I'm too sleepy to think very clearly to-night. Let's go to bed now; I daresay I shall either dream or think of a way out of it by the time I meet them in the morning."

(To be continued.)

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THE PARDON

IN the house—a perfect hive of working people, in the Rue Delambre, where Tony Robec had occupied a room for the last two quarters—everybody believed him to be a widower. And not for very long either, for his little boy, with whom he lived all alone, this little boy always so well cared for, as though by a loving mamma, was hardly six years old. And besides, neither the son nor the father had crape on their arms or hats.

Early every morning Tony Robec, who worked as a compositor in a printing house in the Quartier Latin, set out with his little Adrien, the sleep still in his eyes, his head resting on his father's shoulder, and left him at a neighbouring school. After his day's work was done he went to fetch him, and taking his little man by the hand, visiting the butcher's and baker's, carried his purchases home in the child's basket, as any housekeeper would have done, and shut himself up until the next day.

The good-hearted gossips pitied the poor man—he could not be forty years old yet, and his pale face wore so sad a look, his black beard was so profusely streaked with grey, they said to themselves, behind his back:

"That man ought to marry again. He is a good man, never drinks. Surely he could easily find a good young girl who would take care of him and his little son. Have you remarked how well cared for his little one is? Not a tear nor a speck on him. You may be sure he is an orderly man. It seems he earns as high as ten francs a day."

They tried to make his acquaintance. Ordinarily it is not difficult to strike up a friendship in these overcrowded houses, where every one lives with his door open. But Tony had a reserved air about him, a polite way of bowing to persons when he met them on the staircase, which intimidated them.

Every Sunday the father and son, as neat as new pennies, set out for a walk together. They had been seen in the museums, in the Jardin des Plantes. They had also been seen before dinner, in a little café in the Quartier, where Tony indulged in the only dissipation of the week, a glass of absinthe, which he tarried over and sipped slowly, while Adrien, sitting alongside of him, on the leather-covered bench, looked at the illustrated papers.

"No, Mesdames," said the concierge, who was given to sentimentality, to the gossips; "that widower will never marry again. The other Sunday we ran across each other, in the Montparnasse Cemetery. It is there his wife is doubtless buried. It makes one sad to see him with his child. He must have loved the dead wife dearly. It is a rare thing, but there are some like that. He is inconsolable."

Alas, yes; Tony Robec had loved his wife tenderly; and would not soon console himself for her loss. But he was not a widower.

His life had been simple and unhappy.

He was a conscientious workman, but not an expert at his trade; it had taken him a long time before he had been able to "set type" rapidly and make good wages; and for this reason he had not thought of marriage until after he had passed his thirtieth birthday. He should have chosen a sensible girl, having like himself learned the lesson of economy. But love is never conventional.

Tony lost his head to the pretty frivolities of an artificial flower-maker of nineteen years; a good girl, but so frivolous, thinking of nothing but her clothes, and knowing how to dress on a few francs like a little princess.

He had some money saved which he spent in setting up housekeeping; buying a wardrobe with a long mirror front, for which he paid eighty-five francs in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, so that his wife could see her pretty figure from head to foot. He married his Clementine, and the first few months were a foretaste of Heaven. How they loved each other! They had two rooms on the fifth floor in the Boulevard Point-Royal, with a mite of a balcony from which they could obtain a bird's-eye view of Paris.

Every evening as he left the printing house on the left bank, Tony, his overcoat hiding his blouse, and looking almost like a gentleman, waited at the corner of the Pont des Saints-Péres for his little wife, who was on her way home from the Rue Sainte Honore, where she worked.

Arm in arm they hurried gaily along to the far away home and gaily prepared their evening meal. But the Sundays were inexplicably delicious. It was so pleasant a home that they would not go out. Oh, what charming summer breakfasts they partook of by the open window, the panorama of the great city spread out before them and the blue sky above.

While he sipped his coffee and smoked his cigarette, Clementine watered her flowers on the balcony. Overcome by her prettiness, he would rise and kiss her white neck; she would cry out in her soft voice: "Stop now—you naughty fellow!"

Then came a child, their little Felix, and every fortnight they went to visit him at Margency, where he was out at nurse. He died of convulsions at the end of a year. They had soon been consoled by the birth of Adrien, whom the mother desired to nurse herself. She left the shop and took home work, but made only half her usual wages; she dressed tastily and played the lady in the Luxembourg gardens as she pushed her baby in his wicker carriage in front of her.

Tony had to make a greater effort; he took extra work on a daily paper, the housekeeping was straitened, they ran into debt.

Then the child grew and went to the infants' school, and the mother, without occupation, naturally a coquette, fell into the habit of dangerous flirtations.

Imagine this poor man, old before his time, and this foolish young thing of twenty-five as pretty as a Greuze.

One evening, coming home with the boy, whom he had taken from school as he passed by, he had found a letter on the mantelpiece, from which, upon opening it, had fallen Clementine's wedding ring. In this letter the naughty child had said good-bye to him and her child, and had asked him to forgive her.

Tony was more broken-hearted than angry. He mourned deeply, and when Adrien said to him, "Where is mamma? Will she return soon?" he would embrace the little one passionately and reply, "I do not know."

Clementine had gone away in the first part of May. Oh! how perverse the odour of lilacs sometimes is. Tony in the July term had sold nearly all his furniture in order to liquidate his debts, and had gone to live in the Rue Delambre, trying to economise. This was where he was living so quietly, so honestly with his little boy, and where they took him to be a widower.

Towards the end of September the workman had received a letter from his wife, four pages of incoherent, despairing pleadings. She was abandoned and repentant, and she cried out, begging for mercy. But Tony was proud, and made no reply to the guilty woman.

He heard nothing more from Clementine until Christmas Eve.

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On that day for several years he had been in the habit of going with his wife to lay a modest bouquet—a few artificial violets with a rose in the centre—on the grave of their little Felix, their first-born, who had died so young and who was buried at Montparnasse.

For the first time since his marriage Tony Rubec was obliged to perform this pious pilgrimage alone, but for his little Adrien; and, as he passed under the cemetery gateway in the gloomy winter, the image of the absent fugitive came more vividly before his eyes and caused him poignant sorrow.

"Where is she now?" he thought. "What has she become?"

But on reaching Felix's grave, which he only found after a long search, he stopped in surprise.

On the flat stone lay three or four playthings, such as one would give to the poorest children—a trumpet, a punchinello, and a jack-in-the-box. They had just been laid there evidently, for they were brand new having been bought that very day.

"Ah! here are some toys," cried Adrien joyously on his knees before his treasure-trove.

But the father spying a piece of paper tied to the playthings took it up and read these words, the writing of which he recognised: "For Adrien, from his little brother Felix, who is now with the Christ Child."

All at once he felt his son press against him and heard him murmur in a frightened voice: "Mamma!" and some few feet away from him, kneeling among a group of cyprus trees, he saw his wife, clothed in a poverty-stricken robe and shawl. Oh, so pale! her eyes so sunken! her joined hands extended towards him in supplication.

Between ourselves, readers, I am sure that Tony Robec had not until then given one thought to Him who, born on this Christmas Day, taught by word and by example the Divine precept of pardon for injuries done to us. The workman had no religion, but his plebeian heart knew not self-love or rancour. After a shiver, caused more by the anger at the remembrance of the wrong done him than by pity for the condition of his miserable wife, whom he had once so passionately loved, he pushed the little one towards her gently.

"Adrien," he said, "go and kiss your mamma."

She seized the child and strained him to her convulsively, kissing him hungrily on his lips, his eyes, his hair, and, then rising and turning a beseeching look upon her husband, she murmured:

"How good you are."

But he was already standing near her and replied, his dry mouth emitting a harsh sound:

"Do not speak. Give me your arm."

It is not far from the cemetery to the Rue Delambre. They walked the distance quickly. Tony felt Clementine's arm trembling as it rested on his. The child walked beside them, his mind already occupied with his playthings.

The concierge of the house in which Tony lived was standing upon the threshold of her room.

"Madame," he said to her, "here is my wife, who has been in the provinces for the last six months, tending her sick mother, and who has returned now to care for me and the little one."

And as they climbed the staircase he was obliged to partly carry the poor woman, who had burst into sobs and was almost fainting from emotion and joy.

On reaching his room, Tony seated his wife in the only armchair, placed her child in her arms once more; then he opened a drawer, drew forth a common pasteboard box, and took Clementine's wedding ring from it, placed it upon her finger without one reproach or bitter word; without one rebuff for the past; and silently and gravely, with the large generosity of simple hearts, he kissed her on the forehead, to assure her more completely that he pardoned her.

A LADY OF WESTMORELAND

THE days and the nights were very lonely for Mrs. Francis Evelyn. Francis, her husband, was in India somewhere with the army, and she was here in the old house in the north, alone with her servants.

Mrs. Evelyn was very beautiful. So beautiful that she found much diversion in sitting for hours before the mirror contemplating her own loveliness; admiring the brilliancy of her golden hair, the sweet languor of her blue eyes, the graceful contours of her figure, and the peach-like bloom of her skin.

She was very young. So young that she romped with the dogs, teased the parrot, and could not fall asleep at night unless old Mrs. Simkin sat beside her bed and told her stories.

Lord Nolan found her looking very lovely and disconsolate one day when he stopped to talk with her. She was pale, and her blue eyes were dim with unwept tears.

When he left Mrs. Evelyn that day her eyes were no longer dim and a something of the dreariness that weighed upon her had been lifted away. That mysterious, that treacherous bond called sympathy had revealed them to each other.

He came to her very often that summer, clad always in cool white flannels, with a flower in his button-hole. His pleasant brown eyes sought hers with warm, friendly glances that comforted her as a caress might comfort a disconsolate child. She took to watching for his slim figure, a little bent, walking lazily up the avenue between the double line of chestnuts.

They would sit sometimes during whole afternoons in the sheltered corner of the verandah; playing the piano and talking, talking incessantly during the first days when they were unconsciously unfolding themselves to each other. Then a time came—it came very quickly—when they seemed to have nothing more to say to one another.

He brought her news of the war; and they talked about it, listlessly, between long intervals of silence of which neither took account. An occasional letter came by roundabout ways from Francis—guarded and saddening in its tone. They would read and sigh over it together.

Once they stood before his portrait that hung in the drawing-room, and that looked out at them with kind, indulgent eyes. Mrs. Evelyn wiped the picture with her gossamer handkerchief and impulsively pressed a tender kiss upon the painted canvas. For months past the living image of her husband had been receding further and further into a mist which she could penetrate with no faculty or power that she possessed.

One day at sunset, when she and Lord Nolan stood silently side by side, looking across the wild expanse of moor to the mountains, aflame with the western light, he said to her: "Dearest, let us go away from this gloomy country. Let us go to Paris, you and me."

She thought he was jesting and she laughed nervously. "Yes, Paris would surely be gayer than Westmoreland," she

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answered. But he was not jesting. She saw it at once in the glance that penetrated her own; in the quiver of his sensitive lip and the quick beating of a swollen vein in his brown throat.

"Paris—or anywhere—with you—ah, yes!" he whispered, seizing her hands. But she withdrew from him, frightened, and hurried away into the house, leaving him alone.

That night, for the first time, Mrs. Evelyn did not want to hear any stories, and she blew out the wax candle that till now had burned nightly in her sleeping-room under its tall, crystal globe. She had suddenly become a woman capable of love or sacrifice. She would not hear Mrs. Simkin's stories. She wanted to be alone, to tremble and to weep.

In the morning her eyes were dry, but she would not see Lord Nolan when he came. Then he wrote her a letter.

"I have offended you and I would rather die!" it read. "Do not banish me from your presence that is life to me. Let me lie at your feet, if only for a moment in which to hear you say that you forgive me."

Men have written just such letters before, but Mrs. Evelyn did not know it. To her it was a voice from the unknown, like music awaking in her a delicious tumult, that seized and held possession of her whole being.

When they met he had but to look into her face to know that he need not lie at her feet craving forgiveness. She was waiting for him beneath the spreading branches of an oak that guarded the gate of her home like a sentinel.

For one brief moment he held her hands, which trembled. Then he folded her in his arms and kissed her many times. "You will go with me darling? I love you—oh, I love you! Will you not go with me, dearest?"

"Anywhere, anywhere," she told him in a fainting voice that he could scarcely hear.

But she did not go with him. Chance willed it otherwise. That night a telegram brought her a message from the frontier telling her that Francis, her husband, was dead.

Playing the piano.

When the new year was still young Nolan decided that, all things considered, he might, without any appearance of indecent haste, speak again of his love to the little widow. That love was quite as acute as ever; perhaps a little sharper, from the long period of silence and waiting to which he had subjected it. He found her, as he had expected, clad in deepest mourning. She greeted him precisely as she had welcomed the parson when the kind old priest had brought to her the consolations of religion . . . Clasping his two hands warmly, and calling him "My friend." Her old attitude and bearing brought to Lord Nolan the poignant, the bewildering conviction that he held no place in her thoughts.

They sat in the drawing-room before the portrait of Francis, which was draped with his scarf. Above the picture hung his sword, and beneath it was a huge bunch of flowers. Lord Nolan felt an almost irresistible impulse to bend his knee before the altar upon which he foreshadowed the immolation of his hopes.

There was a soft air blowing gently over the garden. It came to them through the open window, laden with a hundred murmurs and scents of the springtime. It seemed to remind Mrs. Evelyn of something far, far away, for she gazed dreamily out into the blue firmament. It fretted Lord Nolan with impulses to speech and action which he found it impossible to control.

"You must know what has brought me," he began impulsively, drawing his chair nearer to hers. "Through all these months I have never ceased to love you and to long for you. Night and day the sound of your dear voice has been with me; your eyes——."

She held out her hand deprecatingly. He took it and held it. She let it lie unresponsive in his.

"You cannot have forgotten that you loved me not long ago," he went on eagerly, "that you were ready to follow me anywhere—anywhere; do you remember? I have come now to ask you to fulfil that promise; to ask you to be my wife, my companion, the dear treasure of my life."

She heard his warm and pleading tones as though listening to a strange language, imperfectly understood.

She withdrew her hand from his and leaned her brow thoughtfully upon it.

"Can you not feel—can you not understand," she said calmly, "that now, such a thing—such a thought, is impossible to me?"

"Impossible?"

"Yes, impossible. Can you not see that now my heart, my soul, my thought—my very life must belong to another? It could not be different."

"Would you have me believe that you can wed your young existence to the dead?" he exclaimed with something like horror. Her glance was sunk deep in the pile of flowers before her.

"My husband has never been so living to me as he is now," she replied, with a faint smile of commiseration for Lord Nolan's fatuity. "Every object that surrounds me speaks to me of him. I look yonder across the moors and I see him coming towards me, tired and toil-stained from the hunt. I see him again sitting in this chair or in that one. I hear his familiar voice—his footsteps upon the galleries. We walk once more together beneath the stars; and at night in dreams I feel that he is there, there, near me. How could it be different? Ah! I have memories, memories to crowd and fill my life, if I live a hundred years!"

Lord Nolan was wondering why she did not take the sword down from her altar and thrust it through his body then and there. The effect would have been infinitely more agreeable than her words, penetrating his soul like fire. He arose confused, enraged with pain.

"Do not be offended," she said kindly, holding out her hand. "You are going to Paris I suppose?"

"What does it matter," he exclaimed desperately, "where I go?"

"Oh, I only wanted to wish you *bon voyage*," she assured him amiably.

Many days after that Lord Nolan spent in the fruitless mental effort of trying to comprehend that psychological enigma—a woman's heart.

Mrs. Evelyn still lives in Westmoreland. She is rather an old lady now—a very pretty old lady, against whose long years of widowhood there has never been a breath of reproach. The memory of Francis still fills and satisfies her days.

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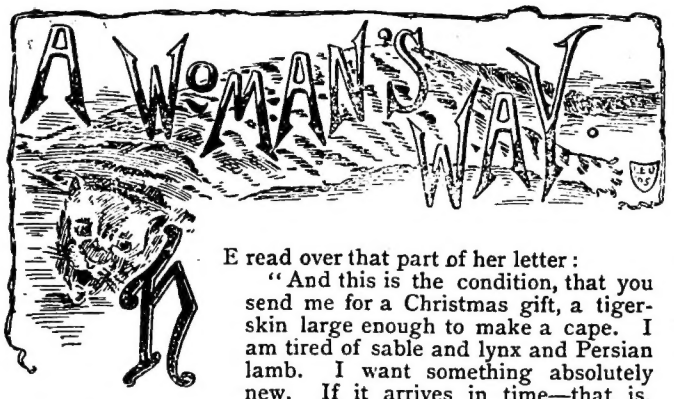

E read over that part of her letter:

"And this is the condition, that you send me for a Christmas gift, a tiger-skin large enough to make a cape. I am tired of sable and lynx and Persian lamb. I want something absolutely new. If it arrives in time—that is, before the 25th—you may consider that I am engaged to you. A caprice? Well, perhaps I am a creature of caprice!"

In the shadow of the splendid mountain he lay at ease that balmy November afternoon. He had yet some six or seven leagues to ride to the capital; but his horse was a good one and he could ride by moonlight. He was returning from the port. The tiger-skin was already on its way to London, it would be in her hands within two weeks. He had gone far out into the wilderness to the south and he had shot and skinned his tiger, and the skin was a glorious one, more beautiful than he had hoped to find. Dorothy would be delighted. All was well. He would go back in April and press an immediate marriage.

In the distance, winding up the mountain in the path that Jerome had come, another traveller toiled along slowly and ill at ease. He had misjudged his horse, and had ridden too furiously for the first ten miles. The beast had suddenly gone lame. The traveller knew no Spanish, and could gain little assistance from houses by the roadside. Jerome watched him lazily from his resting place, until the new-comer was close at hand, then suddenly sprang up.

"Norton!" he shouted. "Melville Norton! In the name of all that is good! Is that you?"

The lame horse stopped. The traveller gazed intently for a minute.

"Ah! There you are, Phil! Rather surprised to see me? Well, I just thought I'd come down here. Got a confoundedly bad bargain in horseflesh here. Made good time for awhile, but the brute's gone to pieces. I'll be a couple of days in this old Mexican saddle, I suppose."

"We'll ride along together," said Jerome. "But this is a surprise. You told me nothing on earth would induce you to come to such a country, you know."

"Yes, I know; but I changed my mind. The truth is, I got into a beastly scrape. Thought best to get out of the way."

"Was it—a woman?" Jerome smiled faintly.

"You guess easily."

"Well, what then?"

"Why, another man was going to shoot me. And as the pretty creature happened to be the one she wanted, I didn't think it worth while."

"You didn't love her?"

"No."

"She loved you?"

"Never cared a straw for me. Used me as a convenience. Other fellow is very rich and very devoted. She keeps him at a high pitch—stirs it up to the boiling point of jealousy. We were engaged in a flirtation when he came in on us. Old Steele—you know Steele? She'll manage him as she does her father. A knowing girl is Dorothy."

"Who did you say?" asked Jerome, very quietly.

"Dorothy Holman. Why, you know her well enough. Flirted with her yourself, I should say."

Jerome had untied his horse that was grazing close by. He bent over and let down the stirrup on the near side. After a moment he spoke soberly:

"When did you arrive?"

"This morning, of course."

"I didn't know any steamer had come in. It will be going out again to-night or to-morrow, I suppose; I think I will return to the port at once. I must go back to England."

Norton stared. "Go——to——England?"

"Yes, I have just thought of something most important. I——I had meant to go back in a fortnight." He sprang into the saddle. "You can't miss the road to the capital—it's plain enough. Good-bye." He struck his spurs into the horse and was off down the mountain again.

Philip Jerome rode at wild speed for a time. His heart was beating crazily within him. To be tortured thus thousands of miles away! Had Dorothy deceived him?

The next four hours were only a confused horror for him. At midnight the steamer sailed and he was on board.

. . . . . .

It was bitter weather in the metropolis when Jerome arrived in England. A cab took him direct from Waterloo to her father's house. Miss Holman was in her boudoir; the maid hesitated and looked again at him. It was getting late. Miss Holman was having her afternoon tea—he would go straight up. There were no words spoken, yet this was somehow the understanding. Jerome flew up the easy staircase. At the top he paused. It was her voice:

"Yes, it only arrived this morning. Handsome, isn't it? Didn't I tell you I would have a tiger-skin cape? You didn't expect me to take that rug of papa's in the library? Isn't he a darling fellow. Poor Philip! You never would take all that trouble for me, would you, Mr. Steele? Poor Philip! I daresay he has the fever out there, and a lot of devoted Indian maidens to nurse him. It makes me quite blue. If I married him instead of you—oh, don't be silly, George, you know very well it's you I'm engaged to. Nobody else could afford me. I'm an expensive piece—a luxury—eh, George?—There, stop I really don't want my hair disarranged—fancy papa or some one else coming in—No I won't hear any more of your silly jealousy. It was just the same way with Jordan and Charlie Hunt and Mr. Norton. I can't imagine such a stupid—hush! There is——"

Jerome went on and in with white, drawn face. He bowed to Steele and uttered a brief greeting. Dorothy received him with gracious surprise. It was so delightful. But Jerome seemed to have no words. Steele presently rose and withdrew. The two were left alone.

"You look out of temper," she said, with a careless shrug of the shoulders.

"I overheard your conversation," Jerome replied, the words coming with difficulty from his lips.

"Well? And then?"

"You really intended to—to marry Mr. Steele? You—you were not in earnest when you wrote to me about the tiger-skin?"

A sudden passion came over her.

"You've come here to torment me—all about your nasty tiger-skin. Take it away. What do I care for it—or you?"

She stamped. "Go, I say! And never come near me again. I never dreamed of marrying you, you simpleton——"

A flash—a sound that seemed to stun—smoke—and Philip Jerome lay stretched across the tiger-skin.

It was a sudden, desperate impulse; he had not thought of taking his life. He was still breathing when they carried him out.

Two months later Dorothy married Steele. The shooting had been hushed up as "an accident," but Melville Norton read of it in a New York paper weeks after in the far away tropics. With a smile and a sigh he murmured:

"Poor Phil! That was the business that made him leave me there in the road. What a fool she made of him! She'll keep the tiger-skin, no doubt, with blood stains on it.

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